From Reminders to Ownership: Helping High-School and College Age Learners

Presented by Harmony Psychological Services and APLUS Education

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Does any of this sound familiar?

- You're constantly reminding your teen about assignments, deadlines, or responsibilities.
- They know what they need to do, but getting started is another story.
- A planner, app, or organizational system works for a week... then disappears.
- You're not sure when to step in and when to let them figure it out.
- Conversations about school or responsibilities turn into arguments more often than you'd like.
- College is getting closer, and you're wondering: **"What happens when I'm not there?"**

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Why does this keep happening?

Executive functioning helps us **turn intentions into actions.** A student might genuinely:

- Want to get the assignment done
- Know the deadline matters
- Understand the consequences
- Have the ability to do the work

...and still struggle to start, plan, remember, prioritize, regulate, or follow through. For students with ADHD and other neurodivergent profiles, these demands can be especially challenging.

The path from START to FINISH requires numerous executive function skills

START → PLAN → REMEMBER → ADAPT → FINISH

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When the parent becomes the executive function

When a student is struggling, parents naturally step in:

- “Did you check Canvas?”
- “When is that assignment due?”
- “Have you started studying yet?”
- “Don’t forget your practice tonight.”
- “Did you email your teacher?”
- “Let me make sure you packed everything.”

The problem:
The more the system depends on the parent remembering, prompting, and monitoring, the fewer opportunities the student has to practice doing those things independently.

The goal isn’t to stop helping.
It’s to gradually shift **who owns the system.**
Parent manages → Parent supports → Student practices → Student owns

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Independence is a skill, not a switch

As students get older, expectations change faster than executive function skills necessarily develop.

Earlier:
More reminders • More structure • Adults track deadlines • Adults notice problems

Increasing independence:
More choices • More competing priorities • Less supervision • More self-advocacy • More consequences

College / young adulthood:
You are increasingly expected to create the structure that used to be created for you.

Independence develops through practice, not simply through age.

The question becomes: What can your student start practicing now?

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Build Systems, Not Willpower

When something isn't working, the instinct is often:

"They just need to try harder."

But executive function challenges are often better addressed by asking:

"How can we make the next step easier to see, start, and repeat?"

Instead of relying on...	Build...
Remembering	**External reminders**
Motivation in the moment	**Predictable routines**
Keeping everything in your head	**One trusted place for information**

A good system reduces how much executive functioning a task requires.

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Three Systems That Build Independence

After-School / After-Class Routine

Create a predictable transition from the school day into everything that comes next.

One Planning Home Base

Give commitments, tasks, and deadlines one reliable place to live.

Weekly Reset

Step back once a week to look ahead, catch problems, and make a plan.

These aren't rules to follow perfectly. They're starting points to experiment with and adapt.

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System #1: Build a Landing Routine

After a long day of managing demands, **“What should I do now?”** can be a surprisingly difficult question. A simple landing routine reduces the number of decisions required.

A routine might look like:

- **Arrive:** Get home / back to your room
- **Reset:** Snack, movement, music, shower, downtime
- **Check:** Look at your planning home base
- **Choose:** Decide what needs attention first
- **Start:** Take one small first step

Student role:

Experiment with a routine that actually works for *you*.

Parent role:

Help create the conditions for the routine, then resist becoming the routine.

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System #2: Create One Planning Home Base

Students often have information coming from everywhere:

Canvas • Email • Syllabi • Texts • School portals • Work • Activities

The goal isn't to eliminate every source. **The goal is to have one trusted place to answer:**

"What do I need to do, and when?"
Use the fewest tools necessary to reliably capture:

- What needs to happen
- When it needs to happen
- What needs attention next

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Student role:
Choose a home base you'll actually use and build the habit of bringing important information into it.

Parent role:
Help establish the system and troubleshoot it, without becoming the person who maintains it.

System #3: The Weekly Reset
Don’t wait until something is on fire

Once a week, take 10–20 minutes to:

LOOK BACK: What didn’t get finished? What needs to carry over?

LOOK AHEAD: What assignments, tests, appointments, activities, or deadlines are coming?

PRIORITIZE: What are the 2–3 things that most need attention?

UPDATE: Put anything important into the planning home base.

Student role: Gradually take ownership of running the reset and making the decisions.

Parent role: Start as a collaborator. Over time, shift toward being available when asked rather than running the meeting.

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What if the System Isn't the Problem?

Psychology of Independence

High school and college students are still developing skills in **planning, prioritizing, initiating, monitoring, and adjusting behavio**r.

These executive function skills continue to develop until **young adulthood**, particularly planning, impulse control, and long-term decision making.

Independence requires more than simply knowing what to do. It means being able to **do it consistently without prompting from others**.

As parents, the goal is to shift from manager→ coach→ consultant...gradually transferring responsibility.

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Anxiety and Avoidance

“I don’t want to do it” sometimes actually means “I’m overwhelmed,” or “This is too hard.”

Executive function challenges and anxiety can combine to create a **powerful avoidance cycle**:

Task feels overwhelming→anxiety and frustration increase→student avoids→gains temporary relief→task feels harder→anxiety and frustration increase→student avoids again

The more the parents rescue or reassure, the more your student gets stuck in the avoidance cycle. The discomfort may temporarily decrease, but the anxiety/avoidance cycles increases and opportunity to build independence decreases.

Allow your student to **tolerate discomfort while taking the next manageable step**.

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Realistic Expectations

Ask yourself, **what is developmentally appropriate for my student right now?**

Your student might be capable of managing a calendar but might need support prioritizing, or completing assignments but struggling to start them, knowing *what* to study but not knowing *when* to study, or living independently but requiring reminders about appointments.

Look for **progress in level of responsibility.**

Expect skills to develop through **practice→making mistakes→ reflecting→ adjusting→ becoming independent**

Ask yourself, **is this a skill that my student hasn't learned yet, or is this a skill they can perform but aren't using consistently?**

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Parent-Student Dynamics

Here's a common cycle: You notice a problem→You prompt, remind, or lecture your student.-->Your student feels criticized or controlled.-->Your student resists, shutdowns, or avoids.-->You increase your monitoring.-->Conflict increases and independence decreases.

How do we break this cycle?

1. Ask before offering advice: "Do you need help in thinking this through?"
2. Focus on the process: "What do you think got in the way of starting?"
3. Use collaborative problem-solving: "What system would actually work?"
4. Allow reasonable mistakes and natural consequences rather than rescuing.

The goal is to make your support increasingly unnecessary

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When Your Student Might Need More Support

You may need to consider more support when your student's challenges are:

- **Persistent** despite consistent strategies and support
- Apparent across **multiple settings** (e.g. home, school, work, social life)
- Resulting in substantial **academic, emotional, social, or functional impairment**
- Creating **family conflict**
- Associated with a noticeable **change from their previous functioning**
- Or accompanied by significant anxiety or avoidance, depression or low motivation, sleep difficulties, emotional dysregulation, perfectionism, attention difficulties, learning difficulties, and social difficulties

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What Types of Support Can Help?

What are possible next steps?

- School-based supports (IEPs/504 Plans)
- Psychotherapy
- Psychological evaluation
- Executive function coaching
- Academic support or tutoring
- Consultation with other professionals in the areas of need

The goal is is to help your student to develop the skills, confidence, and support system they need to become increasingly comfortable in and capable of managing their own lives.

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What's your next step?

You don't have to figure out the right next step alone.

If tonight helped you recognize where your learner is getting stuck, we'd be happy to help you figure out what kind of support makes sense.

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Executive function coaching and practical skill-building
Book a free 15-minute strategy call →

Harmony Psychological Services
Psychological assessment, therapy, and parent support
Explore the right next step →

Not sure which one fits? Start with either of us and we'll help point you in the right direction.
Email Harmony: sharonhuang.phd@gmail.com
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